# DUCKS UNLIMITED:

## And Wild Life Preservation in Ceylon

BY

Philip K. Crowe

(*With a plate*)

Few non-hunters seem to realize that the survival of game in many parts of the world depends primarily on sportsmen; yet it is certainly logical to surmise that those who derive their greatest pleasure and relaxation from shooting should be those who make the greatest effort to ascertain that their sport continues. Certainly many who do not shoot have contributed greatly to the preservation of wild life but, in most countries where protection exists today, the generosity and interest of the hunters have exerted the major pressure to save the game.

Take ducks in America. Fifty years ago countless millions of wild fowl filled the skies as they winged across the United States to and from their breeding grounds in Canada. 'There will always be ducks' said the hunters and the ornithologists. Then suddenly, in the twenties, the migrations fell off alarmingly. The Wild Life Service estimated that not more than 30 million ducks were left out of an estimated normal of 200 million. The great banners of waterfowl that used to wave across the skies had shrunk to tattered ribbons. Something had to be done and done quickly.

The sportsmen met the challenge. A small group, headed by Joseph P. Knapp, formed the 'More Game Birds in America Foundation' and hired 2,000 biologists and observers to conduct an International duck census. The result of this survey revealed that the trouble lay not in over shooting but in the breeding grounds. Draining of the Canadian marshes, to plant wheat to meet the needs of a hungry world during two world wars, was having its baleful affect on the wild fowl population

The survey estimated that 70 per cent of the prospective North American duck population died on these far northern breeding grounds, and that nearly 90 per cent of all the ducks that flew over the United States were bred in these same marshes. Only 23 million acres of land in America was considered good breeding territory for ducks while Canada had 640 million acres. In the vast wet lands of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan lay the Continent's 'duck factory'. The answer obviously was in Canada but, in 1937, there was no way in which U.S. Government funds could be spent in another country to improve waterfowl breeding grounds; the job had to be done privately.

At the foundation meeting set up in Washington, the matter of a title for the organization was brought up and 'Ducks Ltd.' was suggested. 'Limited, hell!' said one outspoken member, 'what we want is ducks unlimited'. And ten days after incorporation, 'Ducks Unlimited', financed by American and Canadian sportsmen, started its first big project, the restoration of 50,000 acres in Big Grass Marsh in Manitoba. There

was no time in those pioneer days for permanent dams; the earth was pushed with bulldozers, holes were blasted in the prairie to hold water. Without water the ducks died. Everyone helped. The Canadian Provincial Governments turned over 60 million acres of poor wheat land; thousands of farmers promised cooperation. One dour old Scotch wheat farmer said 'Dead ducklings ruin my hay', and then his face softened and he added 'I sort of like the living things on my land.'

While these first dams were being built, reports from the field showed that other causes besides drought were cutting down the flocks. Crows and magpies devoured 15% of the eggs; fires destroyed another 12%; so did Indians, skunks, coyotes, wolves, squirrels, and jackfish. In fact, these great northern pike were estimated to consume 8 million ducklings a year! 'Ducks Unlimited' attacked the enemies on all fronts. Wire nets kept out the fish; a bounty was placed on crows and magpies; and the Indians were persuaded to give up eating duck eggs by giving them funds to buy other food they liked better. Even beaver were imported to build their water-holding dams and give the Indians a better living from trapping. Today the record is impressive. 'Ducks Unlimited' has established 3,000 miles of shoreline nesting areas; built 614 dams; banded 70,000 ducks and geese; planted thousands of aquatic plants; and maintains 600,000 acres of water on the prairie provinces of Canada.

All this has cost money, more than $5,000,000 to date, and it has all come from duck hunters. Have the results justified this expenditure? By 1947, ten years after 'Ducks Unlimited' started functioning, the duck population had risen to 160 million and in every year, but one, an increase has been noted. This year's census will probably show that the total is again approaching the norm of 200 million ducks, which the scientists think is about the right number for the continent to carry.

The interesting fact about this recovery in America's duck population is that it has taken place *in spite of a greatly increased number of hunters.* Moreover, more than 2 million duck licenses are issued yearly in the United States, a four-fold increase since 1934, and if these license-holders and the generations after them are to find sport in the skies more money must be raised to open up new breeding grounds in the north country. It is a challenge that Ducks Unlimited, financed by the sportsmen of America, is willing to face.

Here in Ceylon we also face a crisis in the Island's wild life. According to Major W. W. A. Phillips, one of the Island's leading authorities, the last half century has seen great changes in the status and distribution of the Island's unique wild life; some notable forms are already extinct, or verging on extinction, and others have been sadly depleted in numbers and restricted in range. He predicts that the next half century will undoubtedly see the extinction of many valuable species.

Not all of these species can be saved but a concerted effort by the sportsmen of Ceylon could go a long way towards aiding the government to preserve many of those birds and animals which provide the hunter with his happiest hours. An organization dedicated to protecting the Island's wild life already exists, The Ceylon Wild Life Protection Society, but it lacks funds and the whole-hearted support of the sportsmen. Some people seem to think, in fact, that the Society is opposed to legitimate sport. This is not the case. No one knows better than the members of the Society that the animals shot under license in the government preserves constitute but a minute fraction of the numbers killed illegally.

Ducks Unlimited : Scenes in the Grey Lodge Wildfowl Refuge, California.

(*Photos : Sálim Ali*)

So far, however, the Society has made no real effort to attract and organize the Island's sportsmen.

Even for many of Ceylon's rigidly protected fauna the end seems near. The most dramatic and tragic example of approaching extinction is provided by the Ceylon elephant. At the beginning of this century, it was estimated that at least 2,000 of these great beasts roamed the Island's jungles. Then, the herds migrated into the hills during the dry season and elephant paths could be seen along the ridges of the mountains. There was even a small resident herd in the Horton Plains area. Today, experts say there are less than half this number left and they declare that, since the rate of depletion by killing and capturing is about twice the normal rate of increase, the writing is on the wall for Ceylon's noblest animal unless draconian steps are taken immediately to save it.

Two forms of our wild life are already virtually extinct. The Ceylon Hog-Deer, which used to be plentiful in the Galle area, has vanished. Pressure of population to open new lands to cultivation has driven this interesting little deer from the coastal area and, since it was apparently unable to survive in the inland hill country, it has been killed out. Another inoffensive mammal, the Dugong, has become so rare in the shallow seas of the Mannar area that for all practical purposes it is also extinct. Major Phillips thinks that, even with strict protection, it is now doubtful if this unique species, from which the ancients drew their tales of mermaids, can recover. Several years ago I saw one swimming in a tank of turtles and offered to purchase it in order to set it free. The fisherman who had netted it told me, however, that there would be no use in this gesture as it would immediately be caught by someone else. Sluggish and trustful, the Dugong seems doomed.

The wild buffalo, protected from shooting by his resemblance to his tame brothers and a perpetual closed season, is still found in good numbers in the national parks, but illegal capture, for domestic use, has all but exterminated it in other areas. On a five day trip down the Mahaweli Ganga, which flows through one of the Island's few remaining isolated jungle areas, I saw only a few tracks of wild buffalo.

Spotted Deer and Sambar reproduce rapidly; they are still plentiful, therefore, in the national parks and shooting reserves, but outside of these protected areas they are becoming increasingly rare. I have made many motor trips around the Island and have kept careful notes of all wild life seen. Even on the long stretches where the roads run through heavy jungle, as on the link between Puttalam and Anuradapura, and Anuradapura and Trincomalee, I saw pitifully few deer, and all of these during the day. Night shooting from cars has driven the surviving game deep into the forests. Lights on the road at night may mean death to them.

The deer are protected by law, however, and ostensibly derive some benefit from the closed season. No laws cover the Sloth Bear, Leopard, Crocodile, or Wild Pig. Outside the reserves, they can be shot the year round, and this indiscriminate slaughter goes on twelve months a year. In the Wanni I saw a she-bear with two cubs which a local 'sportsman' had shot from a blind over a water hole. He said he had no use for the skins, could not afford to mount the heads, and had only shot the trio for fun. On another occasion I saw the skin of a leopard cub that would not cover a baby. The hunter who had shot it tried to sell it to me for a 'trophy'. Pig's flesh cannot be touched by Moslems but Moorish poachers frequently shoot pig to sell the flesh.